

Schools in Axminster

The end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries

The Universal British directory of 1792 recorded the existence in Axminster of "... an exceeding good boarding school for young ladies, kept by Miss Braddock" alongside "... a charity-school for instructing 20 boys to read and write", and a "... Sunday-school established by the later Mr Wesley's people, where 150 boys and girls are taught to read". Richard Mallock was listed as a school master, and Mary Turner as a school mistress, without stating in which establishments they taught.

White's Directory for 1850 states that the 'Free School' had been built in 1790 by various local charities, and that it was established to teach 12 poor boys and girls of Axminster, and two from Kilmington.

In 1823/24, the directory for that year simply identified John Baker in connection with a day academy, and two ladies' boarding and day academies, one under the name of Charlotte Carter, and the other under that of J&K Shaw. It does not mention the charity school, which other sources identify as being responsible for educating

The 1830s and 1840s

The directory for 1838 refers to "... an endowed school", as well as some teaching which was provided in the newly-built Union workhouse.

John Bond, who was also the deputy registrar for births and deaths was identified as a school master at a day academy on West Street, and this is very probably a reference to the endowed (charity) school.

The Misses Jerrard had a ladies' boarding school on Chard Street.

By 1840 the endowed school was known as the National School, which was located on West Street, and on 7 March 1840 Rev W J Conybeare, vicar of Axminster, placed an advertisement in the Exeter & Plymouth Gazette seeking a school master for it at an annual salary of £40.

The 1844 directory only lists an academy on Church Street run by John Cox¹, and another on Lyme Street run by Sarah Gosling.

On 12 July 1845 the Exeter & Plymouth Gazette carried an announcement from John Cox reminding parents about the start of the forthcoming term, and such announcements can be found regularly thereafter, including one on 29 December 1849 confirming that his school would re-open on 16 January, offering a classical, mathematical and general education at a cost of 20 or 22 guineas a year, including lessons in German and French, and dancing lessons.

The 1850s and 1860s

During the 1850s the town's schools took on a more permanent shape. White's Directory for 1850 again lists John Cox, and confirms that his school was for boarders. It also provides

¹ Many years later, an item in the Exeter & Plymouth Gazette of 19 December 1904 states that Mr Cox' school had been founded in 1840.

the first reference in a directory² to another boarding school, this one run by Mrs Catherine Webber, at which her husband Thomas Nicholas Webber also offered music lessons if required. From 1861, and possibly a few years prior to this, Mrs Catherine Webber's school occupied Buckland House on South Street, and further information on Buckland House school is provided under a separate heading.

On 21 June 1851 the Western Times carried a further announcement from John Cox stating that he had recently moved his school to new premises at Oak House, Chard Street (which had until his death in 1848 been the home of Thomas Whitty Hallett). Information about Oak House school from this point on is provided under a separate heading.

Two other teachers were named in White's 1850 directory: John Austin and Ann Webster. Although it was not stated where they taught, the 1856 directory confirms that Mrs Webster taught at the National School, a position that she held until at least 1870.

The 1856 directory also lists for the first time an infants' school, as well as a second school for young ladies, this being a day school run by Miss Eliza Couch. The 1866 directory gives its address as Jessamine Cottage.

A further directory issued in 1857 provides the first reference to the old Independent Chapel on Chard Street being used as a school room, and the 1866 directory names a teacher called Miss Frances Ribbands of Church Street, but without making it clear where in Axminster she taught.

By 1870 another long-time school for young ladies had opened its doors in Axminster, run by the Misses Ellen S, Eliza Ohle and Anne Reece. Although it was initially located on Chard Street, in 1877 the school moved to 'Heyop House', Silver Street (now the Law Chambers), under which heading further information can be found below.

The National School and Axminster Board Schools

By 1870 the National School regularly had a school master and a school mistress, at that time these posts being held by George Arnold and Mrs Ann Webster respectively, at the site on West Street.

On 27 February 1874 a School Board was established to build new and larger premises, and in 1875/76 two new Board Elementary Schools were built on a site at Paradise Row, just off Chard Street. When these new schools opened, the National School was closed.

The Board School buildings cost £3,400 and were described (in Harrod's directory of 1878) as being built of "... figured brick and Ham Hill stone, with ornamental tiled roof". They were run by an elected School Board, initially chaired by Captain E C Forward (a local solicitor) with the post of vice chairman held by William Pulman (a local clock and watch maker, and father of George Pulman, author of 'The Book of the Axe'). The other members of the board were C H Ewens, Reuben Swain and C H Parrett. The school master was William Henry Baker Catford, and the mistress was Miss Gibbs.

When the 1878/79 directory was published three teachers were named: William Catford and the Misses Ellen and Sarah Gibbs. William Catford was still there when the 1883 directory was published, but by that time the position of girls' mistress was held by Miss Margaret

² Earlier passing references can be found to her school in newspaper reports from 1849, in connection with her husband seeking the position of organist at Axminster Church.

Meek, and that of infants' teacher by Miss Annie Meek. The total capacity of the Board Schools was reported to be 425 children, with an average attendance of 220.

By the time the 1889 directory was published the average attendance was given as 104 boys, 69 girls and about 85 infants. The only change in named teaching personnel was Miss Alice Hayter as girls' mistress. In 1893 the named staff remained the same, and the average daily attendance was hardly changed.

By the time that the 1902 directory was compiled the post of school master had passed to Albert Charles Collard, and the average daily attendance was 103 boys, 97 girls and 136 infants. By 1906 those numbers had changed to 117, 113 and 92 respectively, but the staff remained as before.

As late as 1919 Albert Charles Collard and Miss Alice Hayter were still heading the boys' and girls' sections of the Board School, but by then the infants' teacher was Miss E F Orchard. In 1923 no girls' mistress was named, and Miss O Halliday was the new infants' teacher. By 1926 Mr Collard was listed as in charge of the senior department, while Miss Halliday was in charge of the junior school.

Soon after World War II Herbert Tolchard was appointed headmaster, and the school was known as Axminster Secondary Modern.

The South Axminster (Woodbury) Board School

A second Board School was built in 1875 on land on Woodbury Lane donated by Lady Emma Louisa Tulloch of Old Park, and extended in 1880 to provide a theoretical capacity of 90 children.

When the 1878/79 directory was compiled the mistress was Mrs Ellen Kloer. By 1883 Miss Laura A A Collings had taken over, and the average attendance was 60. In 1889 the listed teacher was Miss M Venman, and the attendance had dropped to 12 boys, 13 girls and 15 infants. By 1893 it was 10 boys, 13 girls and 11 infants, and the teacher was Miss Florence Annie Hayter (probably the daughter of the girls' teacher at the Axminster Board School). She was still there in 1914, by which time attendance numbers had climbed to 61.

By 1919 the teacher was Miss Ada Adley, and she was still there in 1926.

Oak House school

As reported above, John Cox had started his school in about 1840, and by 1851 he had taken over Oak House as tenant. A notice in the Salisbury & Winchester Journal of 18 July 1863 described the school as being run by him, assisted by his three sons. The annual fees at that time were 20, 22 or 24 guineas, and classes in classics, French, drawing, dancing and music were emphasised. By the time that the 1866 directory was being assembled the headmaster was William Robert Cox.

The Exeter & Plymouth Gazette of 20 March 1891 confirms that John Cox had been succeeded as headmaster by his son William Robert Cox until about 1883, when he was succeeded in turn by his younger brother John Francis Cox, who had recently died.

A report in the Exeter & Plymouth Gazette of 22 February 1894 reveals that Oak House itself had been purchased from the estate of the late Charles Hallett by James Coate, the owner of one of the two local brush works, but it was evidently an investment, and the school remained there.

The school was then taken over by Thomas Ramsay MA, who ran it until he was succeeded by his son G A Ramsay, who in turn ran the school until 1913, when it was acquired by Rev Albert L Panchaud. The Western Times of 19 September 1913, which announced this change in ownership, stated that the school had up to 100 boarders at a time by then. Rev Panchaud remained in Axminster for a time, but by the end of the war he was in Egypt, and by 1916 it appears that Oak House had reverted to being a private dwelling.

Buckland House school

As reported above, by 1861 Mrs Catherine Webber's school for young ladies was established in Buckland House, South Street. She remained there until at least 1883. She died in early 1888.

There is no mention of Buckland House as a school in the directory for 1889, but by 1893 it was again listed, described as a boarding and day school, with the headmistress being named as Miss Jane Beviss Pope. She was again listed in 1902, by which time she would have been about 70 years old, and by 1906 the headmistress was Miss Alice Munday.

By the time of the 1911 census Miss Munday had been joined by Miss Clara H Higgs, and they ran the school as partners until at least 1926, when they were listed in the directory for that year, and confirmed by an item in the Western Times of 23 December 1926. Three years earlier the Exeter & Plymouth Gazette reported that a 6-year-old boy who was a boarder at the school had run away on his own, by catching the train to Lyme Regis.

The last directory listing for Buckland House school is in 1935, when the principal was Miss Barralet.

Heyop House school

As reported above, the Misses Reece ran a small school for young ladies on Chard Street until at least 1873, but then at Heyop House, Silver Street from 1877. (In 1878 Mrs A Paul was listed as having a ladies' school on Chard Street: the only mention of this establishment that has been found.)

Some directory listings (e.g. 1878/79) include references to Mrs Mary Reece as well as the Misses Reece, and in 1887 Ellen S Reece, the eldest sister, died. On 20 December 1897 the Exeter & Plymouth Gazette carried an advertisement from them seeking 'musical assistance'.

Heyop House school continued to be listed in directories until 1906, and it is understood that it closed in 1907.

St Mary's Roman Catholic school

St Mary's Roman Catholic primary school was built beside the church. By the time that the 1878/79 directory was compiled Miss Julia Cogan was the school mistress at St Mary's. By 1883 she had been succeeded by Miss Mary Harrington, and the average attendance was 46. By 1889 this had climbed to 40 boys and 40 girls, and the mistress was Miss Mary A Delaney. She was still there in 1893, teaching 39 boys and 42 girls.

By 1902 the teacher was Miss McGrath, who remained in post until teaching duties were taken over by Nuns: first the Sisters of St Paul (from at least 1902 until at least 1914, when average attendance was 61 children) and then the Sisters of Mercy (from at least 1919 until at least 1926).

Pippins school

Pippins primary school was opened in 1945/46 in the building on the corner of Lyme Road and Stoney Lane which had until then been known as Terrace Lodge. It was linked as a 'feeder' school to Shute school, which had been founded in the 1930s by Miss M Ferguson Bridie.

High Wych / St Mary's school, Trinity Hill

A private mixed primary school was set up in extensive grounds near the top of Trinity Hill soon after world War II by Miss M O Williams (headmistress) and Miss Baker (deputy headmistress).

In the early 1960s the school changed hands, and was taken over by Mr & Mrs Birkett.